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Combination
Prevention for HIV
Central America and Mexico



Success Story

“Life is priceless”: using mobile phone and SMS technology to reach most at-risk populations

“As ‘Patricia’ said, even though my body has a Price, my life and my health are priceless,”



Fabiola¹ stands outside the door to the room that she rents on a weekly basis and uses to attend to her clients. She has been working in Guatemala City’s area of “La Línea”, a strip along the old train tracks where over 300 sex workers line the streets and receive up to 5 clients per day, each. “Sometimes clients will offer me more money to not use condoms, kind of what happened to ‘Patricia’ in her story”, she says.

Fabiola is one of the sex workers reached by the USAID Combination Prevention Program for HIV and invited to participate in an interactive behavior change communication methodology designed in the form of a “soap opera” and adapted to short message system (SMS) and mobile phone technologies. Users subscribe to the service and receive three messages per day, three times a week. They receive airtime and other prizes, by participating, responding to questions and completing their unique identifier code as a way to track their participation.

The soap opera follows the story of ‘Patricia’, a sex worker who has a son and is pressured by the brothel owner to not use condoms and receive more pay from her clients. In the story, Patricia becomes infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and suffers from its consequences. The Pan American Social Marketing Organization (PASMO), implementing partner for the Combination Prevention Program, designed and developed this methodology entitled “La vida no tiene precio” (Life is Priceless) as a form of *edutainment* through which participating sex workers could not only find a form of entertainment and escape while following the story, but also read about situations they may have experienced in sex work and matters related to HIV, STIs, violence, gender, and other topics. In parallel form, PASMO and partner NGO outreach workers follow the story with the participating sex workers and provide follow-up questions and support when discussing the story of ‘Patricia’ and how it relates to them, risky situations and the adherence to healthy behaviors.

Since the methodology was developed under a combination prevention approach, it also discusses biomedical services, such as HIV testing and counseling and screening for STIs, in addition to other structural factors that influence healthy behaviors, such as violence and gender. “Fortunately, I haven’t felt pressure from the owners of this room to not use condoms”, says Fabiola. “Even when clients ask me not to use condoms, as ‘Patricia’ said, even though my body has a price my life and my health are priceless”.

PASMO and NGO outreach workers actively promoted the SMS methodology among sex workers in key cities of Guatemala along the HIV epidemiological corridor. They also identified situations where one sex worker would read to, and follow the story with her friends and colleagues.

During the three months the SMS methodology was available for subscription in Guatemala, over 380 phone numbers registered to participate. Moreover, the methodology was launched in the following months in El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama, along with a separate SMS methodology for transgender women.

¹ Fictitious name used to protect the identity of the person in the story

